



Mt. Wilson and Oak Creek Canyon

---

# RED ROCKS CANYON NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

---

## INTRO

Las Vegas, home of the 24-hour party. Buffets, shows, and gambling might be the headliners in this neon-encrusted city, but the real excitement lies about 15 miles west of town in Red Rocks State Park. Not many climbing areas located in the United States can offer what the Red Rocks can. Where else can you find world-class sport climbing snuggled right up next to world-class trad climbs?

On the east side of the park, recent years have seen the development of a destination sport climbing area, with bolted climbs up into the area of 5.13d or so. The varnished nature of the overhanging sandstone has left some brutal climbs on the short, featured walls. Sport climbers have taken advantage of these features, and peppered the corridors of the east side with hundreds of bolted route.

Over on the west side, the story changes to one of huge walls long approaches, and awesome views. One of the finest long route areas in the country, Red Rocks is also host to such renowned routes as Leavittaton 29 and the often filmed Desert Gold.

Moderate climbers, in search of long routes, will also be pleasantly surprised, as there are some classic long routes that weigh in at 5.9 or less (see Recommended Routes below).

So, if you're looking for just about any kind of climbing, you will probably be able to find it out there west of the glitter and neon, on the fringes of Vegas in the Red Rocks. And no matter what brand of climbing you go for, it will be intense. I guarantee it!

## HISTORY

Back in 1967, the area was known as the Red Rocks Recreational Lands. In 1974, the area was purchased by the Nevada Division of State Parks when it was threatened by a housing and golf course development (we could use some of that around here). The current loop road was completed in 1978. In 1990, the area became the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, remaining under the management of the Bureau of Land Management, with an estimated 800,000 visitors per year. Climber visitation has continued to rise, aided by the influx of sport routes along the east side of the park.

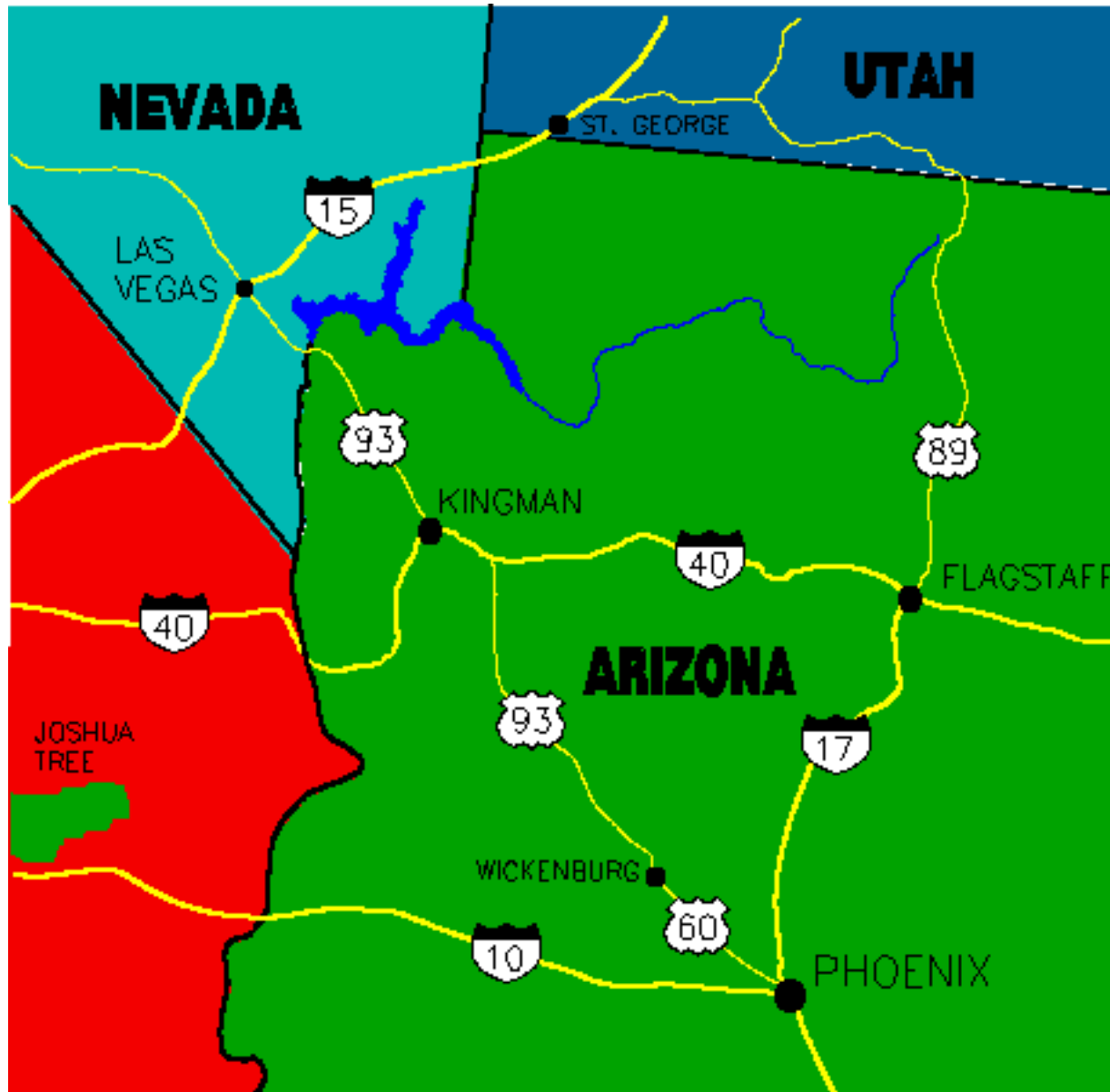
Climbing has been going on in the Red Rocks since around 1968, when local teenager, Joe Herbst, along with other area explorers started looking over the local rocks with the idea of climbing them. A familiar story in many areas across the country, Herbst got his initial training on the walls of Yosemite and then took what he had learned back to his hometown, where he realized he had something special in his own backyard and began to climb the walls (so to speak). Herbst soon hooked up with another local couple, Joanne and Jorge Urioste and the three climbers spent the years, from 1973 to the 1980's putting routes up all over the canyon. Perhaps the most famous big route at the Red Rocks is the awesome Levitation 29, a route which was pioneered with aid in April of 1981 by the Urioste's and then free climbed at 5.11 a month later by a visiting John Long and Lynn Hill with Joanne Urioste along to help.

When the sport climbing craze hit the Red Rocks around '87, the bolts started going in at a furious rate. As can be expected, there were lots of clashes between the staunch traditionalist climbers and their born-again sport climber brethren. As with most ethical disagreements, the sides seem to have settled on a mutual understanding. By 1989, 250 to 300 routes had been put up and you can only imagine how many have gone in since then. The swiss-cheese drillers have moved on to new areas in Colorado (Rifle) and Mexico and route development has probably slowed to a crawl, but in their wake, they've left many routes that can be a really fun climbing experience.

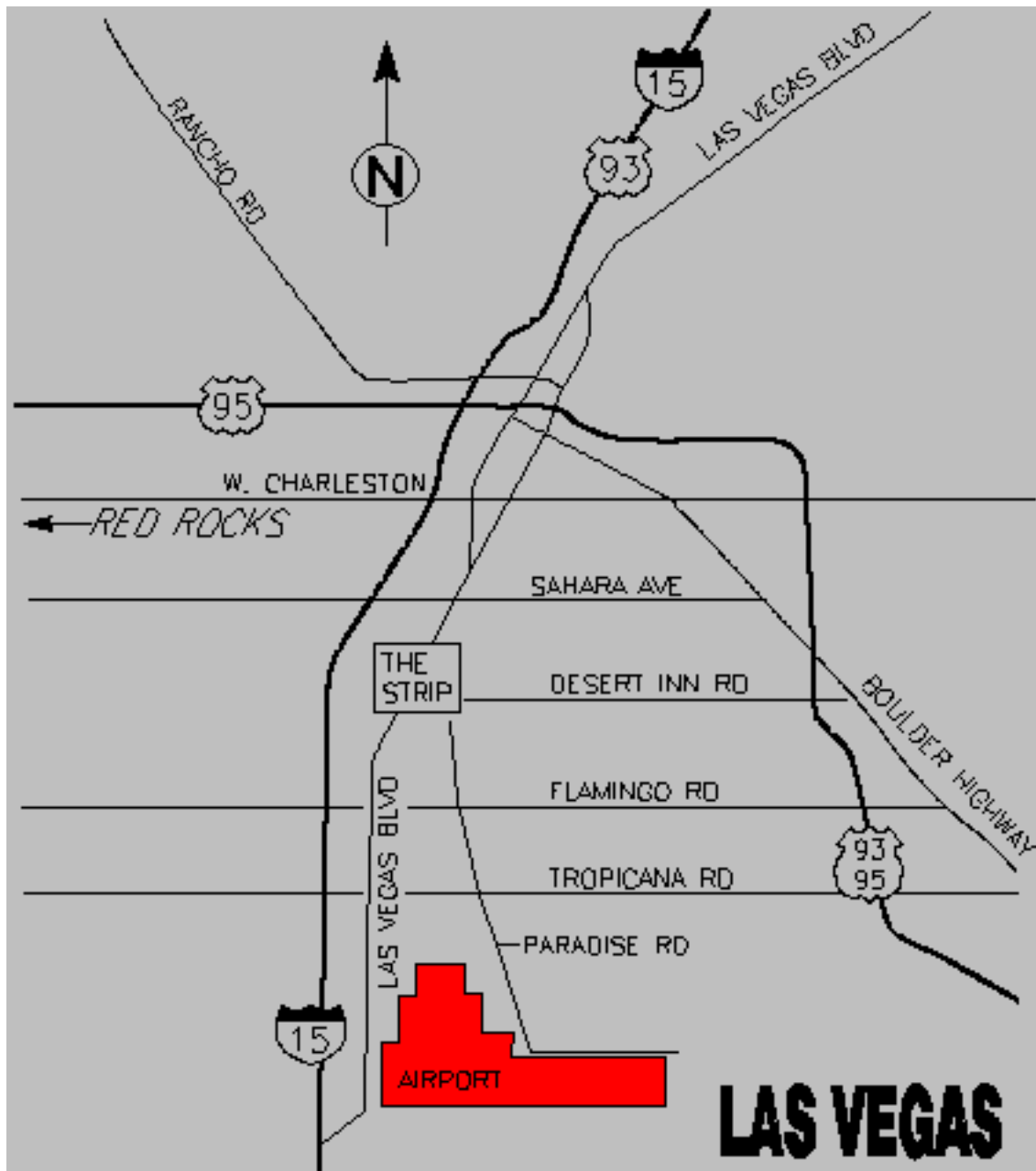
## HOW TO GET THERE

Getting to Vegas is fairly easy. If you're outside of driving distance, I'm sure your local travel agent can set up with a nice travel package for a weekend of gambling.

Should be cheap too, since this is probably one of the AARP's favorite destination getaways. If you're within driving distance, Las Vegas is access by one major highway (I-15), and several small ones. From Phoenix (287 mi.), you drive in from the southeast on highway 93 across Hoover Dam. From Los Angeles (288 mi.), you can drive northeast up I-15. From Salt Lake City (431 mi.) you can drive southwest on I-15.



Once you're there, it's fairly easy to get around, although the traffic on the Strip can be pretty nasty. On the other hand, it can be quite an experience to drive past all the humongous hotels. It's also fun to cruise down to the "old" part of Las Vegas Blvd. (the northern part up near Fremont) and see all the neon-encrusted buildings packed into that area.



So, you pull into town, looking for the climbing. Find W. Charleston (see map above) and drive west. Pretty easy huh? If you need food, water, or gear, this can be taken care of on the way out (see Food and Gear section below) near the intersection of Rainbow and W. Charleston. About 9 miles out, you'll find the Visitor's Center and the entrance to the loop road. Home Sweet Home!

## WHERE TO STAY

This is a toughie. If you're sport climbing, it may well be worth your time to shack up in town. Especially during the colder parts of the year. The gate into the park's loop road doesn't open until 8am, so you'll have no problem getting there early enough, unless you stay up all night dropping your laundry money at the Black Jack tables. This leaves you with the option of several thousand hotel rooms (depending on the weekend) to choose from. My personal opinion is this: You might as well go

for one of the big-name joints. The rooms are nicer, and I really don't think they cost much more. The price of the room will depend a lot on the time of year and will be higher during the peak tourist season. A couple of years ago at Thanksgiving, Tim and I got a room at the Westward Ho! (right next to the Circus Circus) for \$26. That's not too painful. Anyway, it's worth a few calls to get a good deal.

One of the commonly suggested hotel/motels is Ferguson's Hotel. This is the one that gives so-called "climber discounts." We stayed there over Labor Day (1993). While driving in, we saw two men being handcuffed (one lying face down in the middle of the road). Not generally, the greatest neighborhood in the world if you get my drift, and the room came out to be not much cheaper than what we could have paid for a nicer one at one of the nicer hotels, even with the "discount." Go for one of the big hotels...it's gotta be better.

If you're planning on camping, you have a couple of possible choices, both of which may or may not be available when you get there. The first possibility is just off of Route 159 where a dirt road goes into Oak Creek Canyon. There are several primitive campsites located in this area. Do not camp beyond the gate leading to the canyon itself, or you may find yourself fined and locked in when night comes. There have been rumors that this camp area may be closed in the near future. Supposedly a planned campground is being considered for the loop road, but nothing has been done at this point. The other option is camping along the road leading into Black Velvet Canyon. I've never done this, so it may not be possible, but I've heard that you can camp there.

## FOOD and GEAR

This part is fairly easy. If you're planning on camping out and not returning to town, you can hit the grocery store, located on the northeast corner of the Charleston/Rainbow intersection, on the way out of town. You can even play the slot machines while your partner waits in the checkout line. Ain't no place like Vegas! Your alternative, if you're staying in town (or just for a change of pace from cooking out some night) is to run your ride back into one of the casinos and hit the buffet line for some serious chow. Most of the big casinos offer a fairly cheap all-you-can-eat buffet. The Circus-Circus hotel boasts the biggest buffet. We've found the Excalibur to be pretty decent.

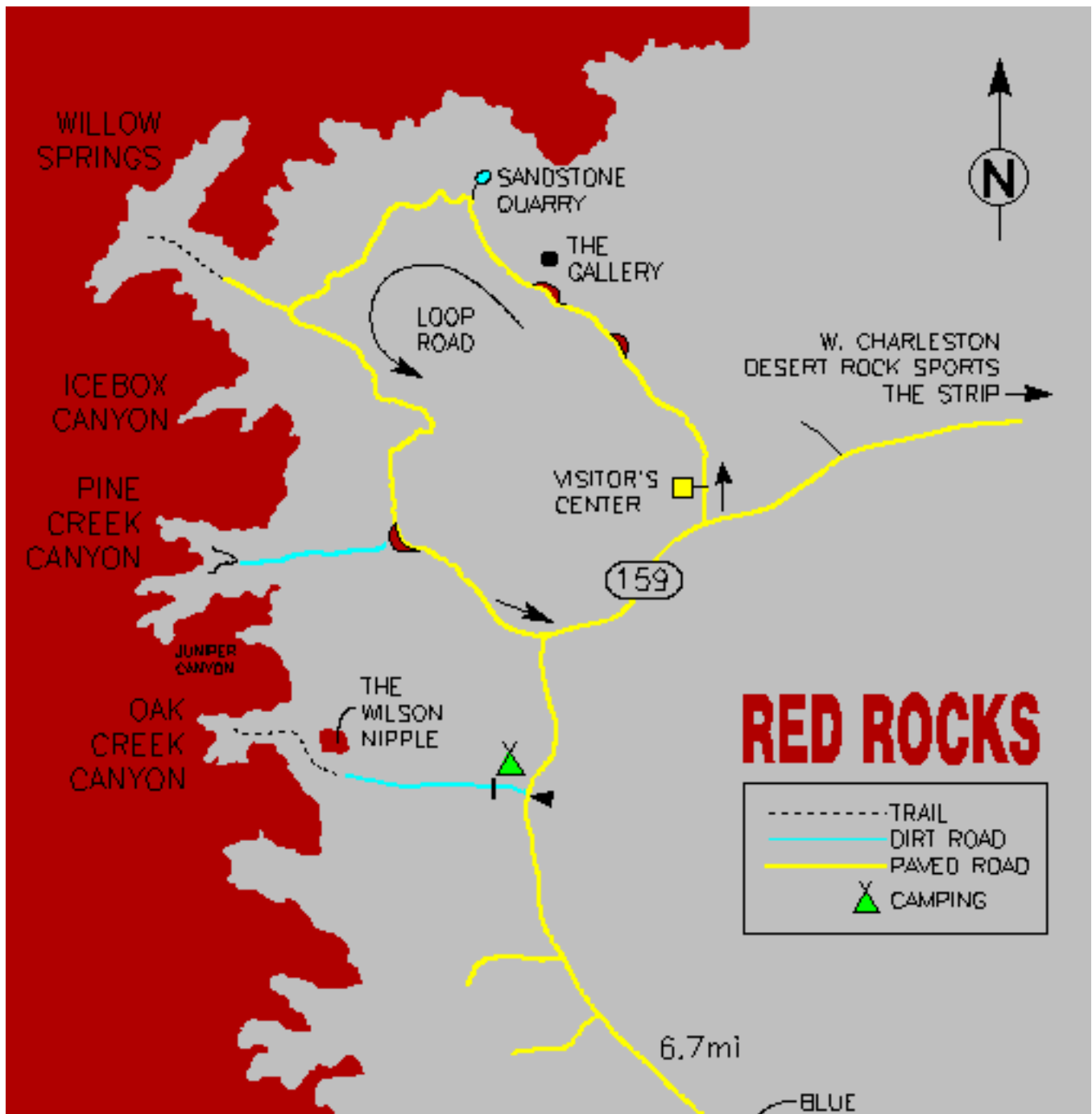
You can pick up water at the Visitors Center, located at the start of the loop road, or get bottled water at the grocery store.

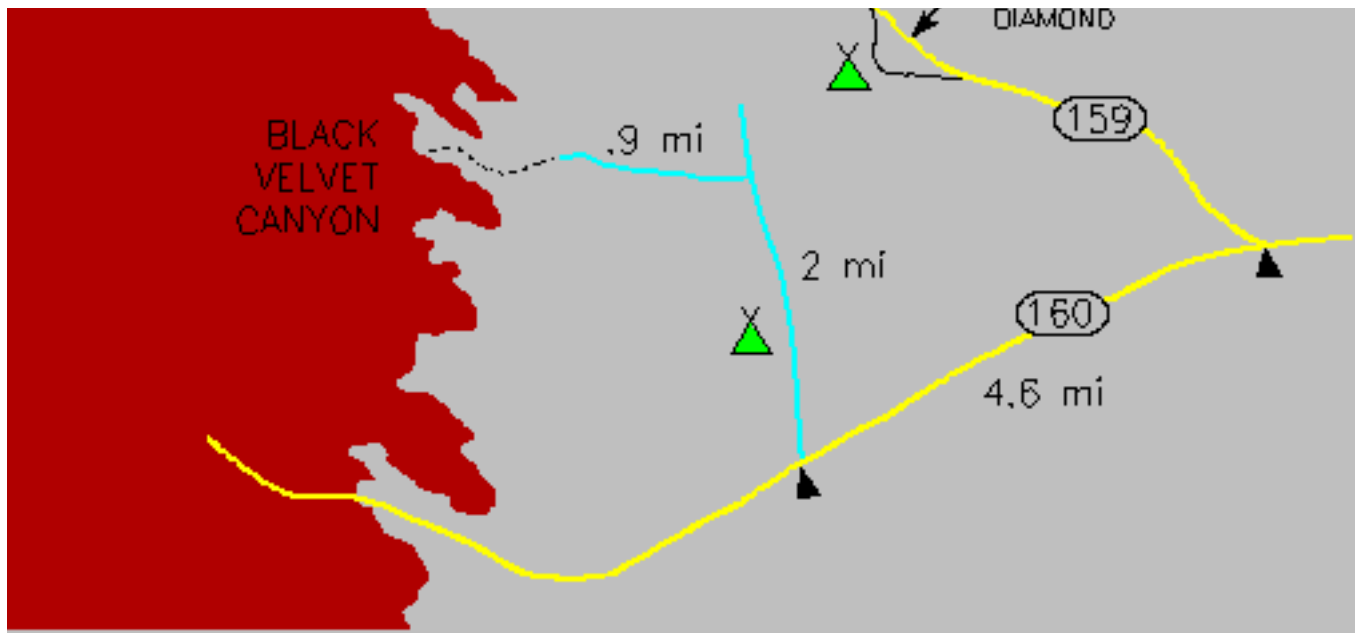
If you forgot some gear, need to replace something, or just want to score some new booty, your best bet would be Desert Rock Sports. This is located just west of the W. Charleston/Rainbow intersection on the north side of the road. The phone number is 702-254-1143. The owners are usually very friendly and a good source of route information.

# WHERE TO CLIMB

The climbing you'll find at the Red Rocks is on Aztec sandstone. Normally, sandstone is very soft and friable, but the sandstone you'll find here is abnormally monolithic as well as having been hardened by a "varnish" coating. The varnish is made up of deposits of various minerals that have leached into the surface of the sandstone, creating a hard shell on the outer surface of the rock as well as the features that make it climbable.

**WARNING!** Don't climb on wet sandstone. The water softens the rock significantly. You can ruin a route by yarding all the holds off it while the rock is wet and soft. Wait at least (and probably more) 24 hours after a rain before climbing!





### Overhead map of the Red Rocks Area

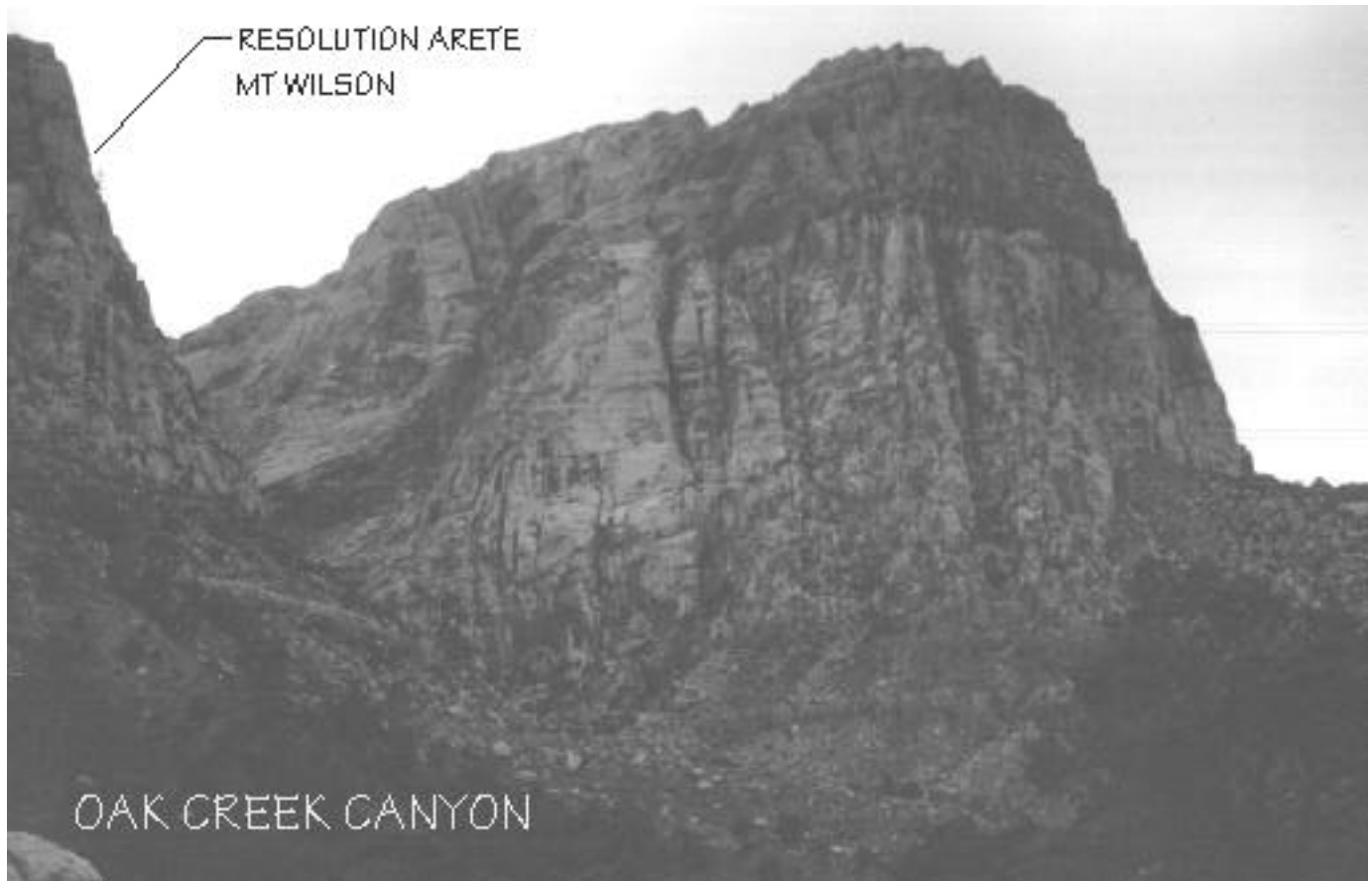
As for the climbing, that all depends on what you're after. The Gallery is probably the most popular and famous sport area, sitting as it does, only a 10 minute approach from the first pullout on the loop road. Some of the most famous of the Red Rocks sport climbs are located at the Gallery. Just behind the Gallery and slightly south, is the tricky-to-find Black Corridor, which has a few more moderate routes for still-blooming hardmen (and women). Continuing down the road is a road that leads to the Quarry area. The formations surrounding this are packed with sport climbs.



## The Gallery

If you're after the "big game" routes, these will be found along the last half of the loop road. The more popular areas include Oak Creek Canyon and Black Velvet Canyon. Black Velvet Canyon is accessed from outside the loop from Route 160 (see map). Climbing in these canyons often requires significantly longer approaches from 30 minutes to 4 hours in length. Be prepared to hike, in other words. Usually, these approaches are fairly benign, though, with no large elevation gains or losses on the way in.

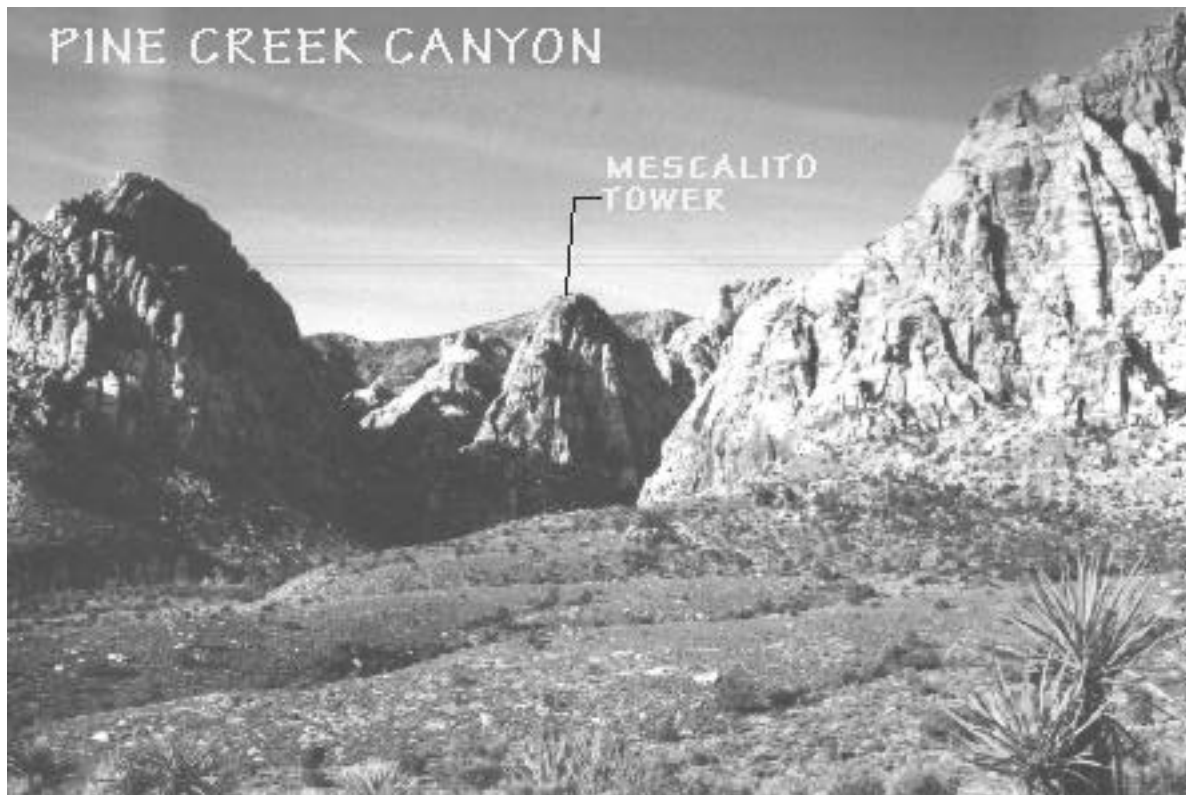




Black Orpheus, at the mouth of Oak Creek Canyon turned out to be a really nice route, right up until the weather went bad on us and we got to spend most of the night rappelling into the Solar Slab gully.



Beginners can also find some nice routes on the Mescalito Tower in Pine Creek canyon. The Cat in the Hat (5.6), and Dark Shadows (5.8) are two routes that have some popularity with novice multi-pitch climbers.



## GUIDEBOOKS

There are currently a couple of possibilities for guidebooks, one of which came out just last year ('94). This new guide, by Joshua Tree ranger Todd Swain, is the best of the bunch by far as well as being the one that is easiest to get your hands on.

### RED ROCKS SELECT

Todd Swain, Chockstone Press, 1993, 186pp

ISBN: 0-934641-45-5

The newest of the Red Rock guidebooks. Good book ! There are descriptions, ratings and recommendations for 500 routes in here. Everything from Grade V's to sport climbing is included.

### RED ROCKS OF SOUTHERN NEVADA

Joanne Urioste, American Alpine Club, 1984 (reprint 1991), 247pp

ISBN: 0-930410-17-3

AAC "pocket guide" to climbing at Red Rocks. This is the old classic guidebook. All the long routes in the canyons are included. This is pre-sport boom days, so you won't see the Gallery in there. 221 climbs are described.

### CLIMBER'S GUIDE TO THE RED ROCKS OF NEVADA

Randy Faulk, Self-published, 1992, 161pp

Mainly an out-of-date sport guide to Red Rocks with only a select few of the longer routes included. I don't think you can find this one any more, but it's pretty sad. Don't bother.

Other References:

Rock & Ice Magazine, Issues # 18, 36, 50

Climbing Magazine, Issues #128, 131

## RECOMMENDED ROUTES

(Obviously this is a hugely incomplete list)

### Longer Routes:

Cat In the Hat (5.6), Mescalito Tower

Solar Slab (5.6), Oak Creek Canyon

Cookie Monster (5.7), Mescalito Tower

Dark Shadows (5.8), Mescalito Tower

Frogland (5.8-), Black Velvet Canyon

Crimson Crystals (5.9)

Epinephrine (5.9), Black Velvet Canyon

Black Orpheus (5.9+/10a), Oak Creek Canyon

Prince of Darkness (5.10c), Black Velvet Canyon

Triassic Sands (5.10), Black Velvet Canyon

Dream Of Wild Turkeys (5.10), Black Velvet Wall

Levitation 29 (5.11), Oak Creek Canyon

### Sport Routes:

Buck's Muscle World (5.9), The Gallery

Gelatin Pooch (5.10a), The Gallery

Vagabonds (5.10a), Black Corridor

Dancin' with a God (5.10a), Black Corridor

Pump First, Pay Later (5.10b/c), The Gallery

Kokopelli (5.10b/c), The Quarry

Nightmare on Crude Street (5.10d), Black Corridor

Yaack Crack (5.11c/d), The Gallery

The Gift (5.12d), The Gallery

The Sissy Traverse (5.13b), The Gallery